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War Beyond the Battlefield: From the Potomac to the Rappahannock

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Abstract

“Be careful what you wish for.” Had the volunteers of Dauphin County’s 127th Regiment heard the old adage before marching off to war in the summer of 1862? Undoubtedly. even if they had, it was far from their minds as they drilled and waited and guarded the perimeter of Washington. These men had enlisted to fight, but now they found themselves consigned to guard duty for their first three months in the Army. Their fortunes would soon change, however, for better or for worse; unbeknownst to them, the Battle of Fredericksburg lurked in their future. [*excerpt*]

Keywords

The Gettysburg Compiler, Civil War, 150th Anniversary, Gettysburg, Civil War Memory, Sesquicentennial, 127th Pennsylvania Volunteers

Disciplines

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THE GETTYSBURG COMPILER

ON THE FRONT LINES OF HISTORY

War Beyond the Battlefield: From the Potomac to the Rappahannock

April 2, 2014

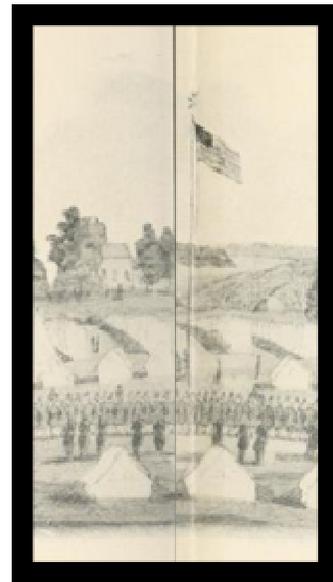
By: Kevin Lavery, '16

“Be careful what you wish for.” Had the volunteers of Dauphin County’s 127th Regiment heard the old adage before marching off to war in the summer of 1862? Undoubtedly. even if they had, it was far from their minds as they drilled and waited and guarded the perimeter of Washington. These men had enlisted to fight, but now they found themselves consigned to guard duty for their first three months in the Army. Their fortunes would soon change, however, for better or for worse; unbeknownst to them, the Battle of Fredericksburg lurked in their future.

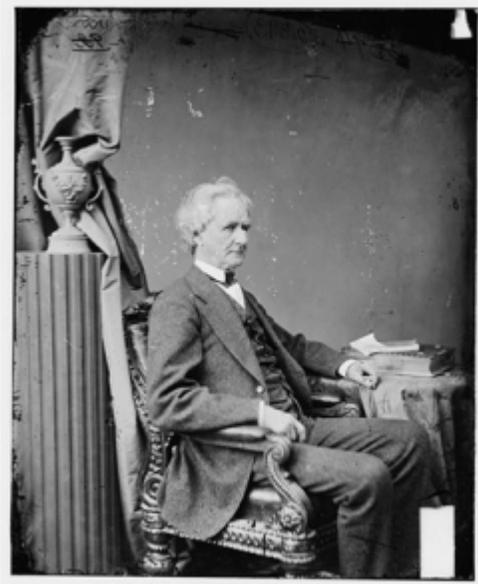
In autumn 1862, the members of the 127th Regiment at last found themselves departing dear Pennsylvania. But, if they believed that battle was in their immediate future, they were sorely mistaken.

Samuel P. Conrad of Company C described the underwhelming experience in a set of letters to his friend Lewis Strickler back in Hummelstown. Although Conrad was enjoying the overall experience and had even gotten the opportunity to see the magnificence of the unfinished Capitol dome, he knew that he and his companions were not there on vacation. “I came down here to kill Rebels,” he grumbled, but the government “brought us down here to cut wood.” Washington had to be ready for siege if the Army of the Potomac failed, and someone had to be responsible for preparing for that contingency.

The monotony drove Conrad to repeatedly try and persuade Strickler to take a train down to visit them for a time. Although there is no evidence that Conrad’s pleas succeeded, the regiment did receive a notable visit from Lincoln’s recently dismissed Secretary of War Simon Cameron and several appearances by Cameron’s son and his nephew. Native to Middletown, a Dauphin borough southeast of Harrisburg and one of the principle localities from which the men of the 127th were gathered, the Cameron family seemingly enjoyed the company of men from home.



Cameron's infamy mattered little to the regiment; the men took pride in the high-profile politico's presence all the same.



Though it was no comfort to the battle-hungry soldiers, Washington was a luxurious experience compared to what they would soon face. Their families could visit them frequently and they became a rather well-drilled regiment. Colonel Jennings, apparently, once won a box of cigars in a wager against the colonel of the 127th New York regiment by proving that his Pennsylvania boys could form dress parade in a minute and thirty seconds. Their war at that point was indeed dull, but it was safe.

Then, on November 30, just as the regiment gave up hope of seeing action in 1862 and began trying to make themselves comfortable on the banks of the Potomac River, Colonel Jennings received orders to mobilize his men.

Their destination was Fredericksburg, Virginia. Anticipation for action did not preclude grumbling from the men that they were being moved from their established camp so late in the year. But, they had enlisted to fight and fight they would, despite the dubious efficacy of their efforts. A well-drilled regiment is not the same as an effective one, as the men of Dauphin County would soon learn on the slopes of Marye's Heights.

To be continued . . .

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Images:

Section of an Illustration of Camp Boas, Page 151 of History of the 127th Regiment Pennsylvania Volunteers.

"Hon. Simon Cameron." Library of Congress Prints and Photographs Division Washington, D.C. 20540 USA. Reproduction Number, LC-DIG-cwpbh-00629. Digital ID, cwpbh 00629 <http://hdl.loc.gov/loc.pnp/cwpbh.00629>.